

# *News from the Wyoming Department of Health*

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## **Cervical Cancer Screening Promoted in Wyoming**

January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month

A representative of the Wyoming Department of Health is reminding women that routine Pap tests can help prevent cervical cancer.

“We know now that almost all cervical cancer is caused by infection from a virus called human papillomavirus or HPV,” said Denise Padilla, health educator with the Wyoming Department of Health’s Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. “HPV infection is very common and is spread through sexual contact.”

“Most people don’t know they have HPV because they have no symptoms,” Padilla said. HPV infections usually go away on their own. When they don’t, cervical cells can change into precancer cells that may develop into cervical cancer if not treated. Women who had vaginal intercourse at an early age, women or women’s partners who have had multiple sex partners, or women who currently have or have had sexually transmitted infections are at increased risk for HPV. Studies have also shown that smoking may act together with HPV to increase a woman’s risk of developing cervical cancer.

Padilla said Pap tests look for abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. “If cell changes are found early and treated, cervical cancer can be prevented,” she said.

The American Cancer Society recommends a first Pap test about three years after the first time for vaginal intercourse or by age 21 (whichever comes first). Continued Pap tests are recommended every one to three years. Women who had hysterectomies may not need continued screening but should check with a medical professional. Women who have gone through menopause still need routine Pap tests.

Women who do not have Pap tests or who do not have them as often as they should are at greatest risk of developing cervical cancer. According to the 2008 Wyoming Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey, approximately 24,000 Wyoming women didn’t have a Pap test within the past five years. The survey indicated cervical cancer screening rates were worse among Wyoming women who fell into one or more of the following categories: no health insurance, no personal doctor, no recent checkup, lower income, working poor, women unable to work, single women and smokers.

Two available vaccines can help protect girls and young women from HPV infections and may reduce the risk of developing cervical cancer by at least 70 percent. Because the vaccines do not protect against all cancer-causing HPV types, routine Pap tests are still necessary.

The American Cancer Society's most recent estimates for 2009 predicted that about 11,270 new cases would be diagnosed and about 4,070 women would die from the disease in the United States in 2009.

The Wyoming Department of Health's Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program provides free Pap tests and pelvic exams to women who qualify. Women ages 50-64 who are low income and have no health insurance are eligible. Women 30 and older may also be eligible if they have not had a Pap test within the past five years. Call 1-800-264-1296 for more information.

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